THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
9 April 1972

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Maintaining an empire—the General explains how

Swords and Plowshares

By General Maxwell Taylor. Illustrated. 434 pp. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. $10.

By NEIL SHEEHAN

This book is bad history, but in its own way, a good memoir, for it tells a great deal about Gen. Maxwell Taylor and those other statesmen of the 1960's who led us into the Indochina war. Taylor's account of some of the events of that period, such as the involvement of the Kennedy Administration in the overthrow of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, is so at variance with the documentary record now available to us in the Pentagon Papers and elsewhere that the kindest description one can give his version is to say that it reflects the wish-think reconstruction of the past in which men of power are prone to indulge themselves in their memoirs.

That kind of factual truth is not, however, what one ought to expect in a memoir. Rather, one would hope to find truths of character, attitude and perspective. Taylor's memoir is filled with enough of these kinds of truths, inadvertently at times perhaps, to make well worthwhile the task of forging through the occasionally stilted language and the bureaucratic detail which interrupt its narrative flow. One emerges from the book seeing more lucidly the realities of the foreign policy of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, in contrast to the illusions we held at the time.

Maxwell Davenport Taylor and his theory of the use of military forces in the conduct of foreign policy came into their own with the Inauguration of John F. Kennedy in January, 1961. Taylor's exemplary military career—born in Keytesville, Mo., on Aug. 26, 1901, he graduated from West Point in 1922, commanded the 101st Airborne Division in World War II and the Eighth Army in Korea—had come to a seeming end in 1959 because of his profound disagreement with the Eisenhower Administration's nuclear strategy of "massive retaliation."

In "The Uncertain Trumpet," published the year after his resignation as Army Chief of Staff, Taylor had argued his doctrine of "flexible response" — the development of strong conventional forces to enable the United States to conduct limited wars below the nuclear threshhold as an effective tool of its foreign policy. In his memoirs, Taylor defines limited war as "rational war" to achieve "national interests," or "a resort to arms for reasons other than survival."

The first task the new President set him to was indicative of the kindred minds Taylor found among the statesmen of the Kennedy Administration and then of President Johnson's. Mr. Kennedy had him take leave from his position as president of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York to conduct an exhaustive review of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

To demonstrate what Mr. Kennedy desired from the investigation, General Taylor quotes from the letter of instruction the new President gave him:

"It is apparent that we need to take a close look at all our practices and programs in the areas of military and paramilitary, guerrilla and anti-guerrilla activities which fall short of outright war. I believe we need to strengthen our work in this area. In the course of your study, I hope that you will give special attention to the lessons which can be learned from recent events in Cuba." Mr. Kennedy told Taylor that he hoped the General's report would help by "drawing from past experience, to chart a path towards the future."

As Taylor comments in his memoir:

"There were several interesting points in this letter. One was the almost passing mention of the Bay of Pigs, which was to be the primary subject of our investigation. Another was the broad invitation to make excursions into any aspect of limited and guerrilla warfare, the first intimation I had received of the President's deep interest in these activities later lumped together for convenience under the heading of counterinsurgency."

Neither in Mr. Kennedy's letter, nor in Taylor's memoirs, however, is the question ever addressed of whether the United States should be invading a foreign country in the name of counterinsurgency. That question, Taylor's memoir implicitly makes clear, had already been answered. The object of Taylor's Bay of Pigs investigation was simply to learn how to do it better elsewhere the next time.

And that is the heart of Taylor's memoir. It is the story of a man and his fellow statesmen who, in the psychological atmosphere and through the ideological forms of the cold war were actually engaged in maintaining and enlarging an American empire through the use of force.

Taylor expresses no essential misgiving over the termination of this course in the

> Indochina war, with its cost of 55,000 American lives so far, well over $100 billion and a million to two million Indochinese lives. He believes that President Nixon has a good chance to attain the central American objective of preserving an anti-Communist South Vietnam. He concludes that, "Personally, I would expect the probable gains of victory to exceed its anticipated costs by a substantial margin." His regrets over Indochina relate to how force was applied there and to the lack of stamina the country displayed.
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> "But even in victory we cannot completely redeem the unheroic image created by many aspects of our behavior in the course of the conflict," he writes. "The record of our violent internal divisions, our loss of morale, and our psychotic inclination to self-flagellation and self-denigration justifies serious doubts as to the performance to be expected from us in any future crisis —an uncertainty which will becloud our prestige and diminish our ability to influence world events as long as it lasts."
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> He blames the news media and the antiwar movement for much of this "unashamed defeatism" and says they caused unwarranted "demoralization and lack of confidence" even within President Johnson's inner circle.

Neil Sheehan reports from The Times Washington bureau and is the author of "The Arnheiter Affair."

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